

The New Yorker's Opinion Leaders Event: Internet Control, Freedom and the Death of Privacy

February 29, 2012 at 3:23 pm



Panelists (l-r) Lori Andrews ("I Know Who You Are and I Saw What You Did"), Tim Wu ("The Master Switch"), Pablo Chavez (Public Policy Director, Google), and Clay Shirky ("Cognitive Surplus") (Credit: Lauren Keyson)

By [Lauren Keyson](#)

The New Yorker held its "Big Story" Opinion Leaders event for a packed group at **Joe's Pub** in NoHo earlier this week. The evening was basically a conversation about free speech and control. It was hosted by the magazine's senior editor **Nicholas Thompson**, who kept the discussion between the internet policy and freedom experts lively and informative.

Panelist **Lori Andrews** who wrote the book, "I Know Who You Are and I Saw What You Did," talked about social networks and the death of privacy. "You might think you are posting information just to family members, but with a modest change in computer code, the privately run **Facebook** can send that information anywhere. Both inadvertently and through conscious decisions, Facebook and other social networks have put private information, including medical

test results, credit card numbers, and sensitive photos in the wrong hands. Unlike Vegas, what happens in Facebook doesn't stay in Facebook."

She emphasized the need for privacy by mentioning the recent disturbing incident where a Philadelphia school was spying on students via free laptops, but didn't tell them they had web cameras snooping on them. Remotely the school watched one kid in his room who was holding something that looked like pills and accused him of improper behavior in his home for what turned out to be the candy **Mike and Ike**.

Clay Shirky, author of "Cognitive Surplus," had some interesting takes on Internet privacy. He said, "In the old days, keeping things private was easy, today it requires a lot of energy. People are voluntarily pooling information – emphasis on pooling — like **YouTube** and **Wikipedia**. But you should have the right to insist that not everything be known about you."

The name **Google** kept popping up during the discussion. **Tim Wu**, author of the book "The Master Switch" and architect of the term "net neutrality," mentioned the giant when explaining the importance of communication and information dissemination in terms of freedom of speech. He said that the threat of control could just as easily, even more easily, come from the private sector because the existence of the internet and its smooth functioning are dependent on private enterprise, not on the government.

He then referred to the recent **Rick Santorum** incident where people were typing the word "Santorum" in Google and not getting the politician's campaign site or other basic information about him in the first page. Instead they got nasty, sometimes vulgar references. Santorum blamed Google for being against him because the company wouldn't change the results. Google's anti-Santorum bias, real or imagined, probably cost him votes.

Shirky felt some sympathy for Santorum, and talked about a world in which someone can arbitrarily hurt another person, "There is the Google juice of people doing these links to Santorum, and he can't fight back. Should Google be able to move those down?"

The public policy director for Google, **Pablo Chavez**, wondered what users expectations are when they Google Santorum, "Is this the right thing to give to people who are looking to read about him?" But in the end he seemed to have a cheerier outlook about internet freedom than the other panelists. "We shouldn't lose sight that the internet created massive democracy," he said. "There are good practices, you can give people choices, they can change email addresses," said Chavez. "Companies do make mistakes but are trying – the ultimate goal is to strike a balance."

Lauren Keyson, "The New Yorker's Opinion Leaders Event: Internet Control, Freedom and the Death of Privacy," Feb. 29, 2012, <http://nyconvergence.com/2012/02/the-new-yorkers-opinion-leaders-event-internet-control-freedom-and-the-death-of-privacy.html>.